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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 080843Z FEB 08
FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9474
INFO RUEHAE/AMEMBASSY ASMARA 2113
RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI 8905
RUEHNR/AMEMBASSY NAIROBI 3366
RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS 3085
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 4169
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3018
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 6375
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 7239
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
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UNCLAS ADDIS ABABA 000315

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NSC FOR PMARCHAN

AIDAC
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAID](#) [PHUM](#) [SENV](#) [EAGR](#) [PGOV](#) [ET](#)

REF: A) ADDIS 3644 B) ADDIS 0120

SUBJECT: USG HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TEAM FIELD VISIT #3: WASH
UPDATE

SUMMARY

¶1. Between January 15 and 21, U.S. Government (USG) Humanitarian Assistance Team (HAT) in Ethiopia staff traveled to Gode and Korahe zones in Somali Region as part of a third field visit to assess the current humanitarian situation, including water, sanitation, and hygiene conditions. The USG HAT visited communities along the Wabeshebele River in Kelafo District and pastoralist communities in Gode and Denan districts, Gode Zone, in addition to Kebridehar District, Korahe Zone. USG HAT also discussed water and sanitation conditions with representatives of U.N. agencies and international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Gode and Korahe zones, as well as local residents. USG HAT staff report that although most ground water sources continue to provide water for both human and livestock consumption, the collective impact of the poor performance of the 2007 gu and dyer rains in parts of Somali Region, damaged and non-operational water sources, and the onset of the January to March jilal dry season indicate that chronic regional water shortage conditions are expected to be more severe than normal. USG HAT staff anticipate the need for emergency water supply interventions to address deteriorating water quality and availability in the coming weeks. End summary.

BACKGROUND

¶2. Somali Region confronts chronic water scarcity. The region is dependent on a combination of water sources, including rivers, boreholes, shallow hand-dug wells, and concrete-lined reservoirs referred to as birkeds. Near the Wabeshabele River in Kelafo District, surrounding villages draw water directly from the river. During the January to March jilal dry season, many ground water sources and birkeds dry up, forcing local populations to relocate and congregate at remaining water sources. In addition, water from both shallow wells and boreholes increases in salinity as the dry season progresses, rendering water non-potable in some cases.

¶3. Poor water quality and hygiene practices contribute to high incidences of diarrhea among children in Gode and Korahe zones. Health facility staff and mobile health team data from Gode and Korahe zones identify diarrhea as one of the top three illnesses among children. Water quality is generally poor, particularly for populations relying on water from rivers and birkeds. In addition, USG HAT staff note that access to and use of hand soap appear to be low based on interviews with villagers in several locations visited in Gode and Korahe zones.

GODE ZONE

¶4. In Gode Zone, USG HAT staff assessed water availability in Denan and Gode districts. In Denan town and the surrounding areas, USG HAT visited a water tankering operation run by the local NGO Ogaden Welfare and Development Association (OWDA) and several shallow wells constructed in the nearby riverbed. The tankering project provides

water to the district health facility, an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp, and schools in Denan town. USG HAT staff note that riverbed wells used by Denan town residents for consumption and household use are shallow, unprotected, and prone to contamination. In addition, water levels typically decrease in February and March making it difficult for families to collect adequate quantities of water. However, OWDA is currently constructing a pipeline from a borehole 12 kilometers outside of Denan to tap stands in the center of town that will alleviate dry season water shortages and improve water quality for local residents. In addition, the pipeline will reduce the need for tankering services and allow tanker trucks to distribute water to rural communities if needed. In outlying areas, the depletion of shallow wells is projected, which will lead to increased hardships for pastoral families and potential movement.

¶5. In Gode District, Gode Zone, USG HAT staff visited several USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA)-funded shallow well rehabilitation projects operated by CHF International. USG HAT staff note that rehabilitated wells were productive but that water quality varied. Rehabilitation efforts include the deepening and lining of existing wells to increase production and water quality, in addition to the construction of livestock troughs. USG HAT staff recommend well rehabilitation interventions as an effective strategy to improve water quality and increase water availability during the annual dry seasons.

KORAHE ZONE

¶6. In El Hahd village approximately 7 kilometers (km) from Kebridehar town, Korahe Zone, USG HAT staff report that an influx of an undetermined number of displaced persons from surrounding areas of Korahe Zone and pastoralists from other parts of the region are straining available water sources. Approximately 20 shallow, hand-dug wells provide water for human and livestock consumption in El Hahd. Villagers and pastoralists expressed concern regarding the increasing salinity of wells as the dry season progresses and increased consumption from large congregations of livestock herds, potentially leading to the early depletion of wells before the onset of the April gu rains.

POOR WATER QUALITY CONCERNS

¶17. USG HAT staff note significant concerns regarding water quality in Somali Region. Although water from boreholes is considered safe for consumption, most families in outlying areas rely on shallow hand-dug wells, birkeds, or river water. There are a small number of protected wells fitted with hand pumps in the area. However, USG HAT staff observed that most hand-dug wells were unprotected and uncovered, permitting contamination of drinking water during collection. Along the Wabeshabele River in Kelafo District, most families draw water directly from the river which is highly turbid and fecally contaminated. According to local officials, the majority of families consume untreated water, including water collected from rivers and birkeds. Boiling water requires fuel which is expensive, and few viable alternatives for water

purification exist in the region. Poor water quality contributes to high levels of waterborne diseases and an increased risk of acute watery diarrhea (AWD) outbreaks.

¶18. Although the current number of AWD cases in the region is low, USG HAT staff note that there is a potential for an increase in the coming months, particularly with the onset of the rainy season in April. USG HAT staff note that in the event of an AWD outbreak, emergency water treatment activities represent an important intervention to reduce transmission. During the 2006-2007 AWD outbreak, humanitarian agencies implemented emergency water interventions in several locations of Somali Region, including the installation of portable water treatment units to treat river water and the distribution of household water disinfectants.

¶19. USG HAT staff note that the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) and NGOs are implementing several small-scale, household level water treatment interventions in Gode and Korahe zones. In Kelafo District, USAID/OFDA implementing partner Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) is distributing Waterguard to families with children enrolled in its supplementary feeding program. Waterguard is a weak chlorine solution used to purify drinking water. In addition, USAID/OFDA-funded UNICEF mobile health teams operating in Gode Zone are distributing flocculent/disinfectant sachets to families seeking health services. CHF International is also planning to distribute Waterguard in 30 villages in Kelafo District that predominantly rely on heavily contaminated river water for consumption purposes. USG HAT staff note that although interventions are small in scale, interventions are reaching vulnerable populations representing families of ill or malnourished children.

WATER SHORTAGE CONDITIONS VARY ACROSS REGION

¶10. Somali Region is prone to water shortages, but current water availability conditions vary across the region. However, the current January to March dry season is expected to be more severe than normal, according to UNICEF. UNICEF reports severe water shortages in eastern Warder Zone, resulting from the depletion of birkeds. In addition, the U.N. reports that the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) are restricting access to productive birkeds in western Warder Zone. In several areas of Warder Zone, residents are already purchasing water from private water tankering operations. As a result of the poor performance of the deyr rains, many people from Danot District, Warder Zone, have migrated to Korahe Zone in search of water where boreholes and shallow wells are still productive, according to the U.N. agencies and NGOs operating in the area. However, water availability in Fik Zone is better due to the comparatively better performance of the 2007 rains and the presence of large numbers of hand-dug wells.

¶11. UNICEF reports that water tankering will be required in parts of Warder, Degahabur, Gode, and Korahe Zones beginning in February and possibly expanding to other areas in March. Significant distances to water points, up to 175 km in some cases, increase the costs of tankering operations. However, UNICEF reports that due to the severity of the water crisis in some areas, water tankering is

the only viable option available.

¶12. USG HAT staff note that borehole water will become increasingly important in the coming weeks as other water sources are depleted, such as birkeds and shallow wells. However, a number of boreholes in Warder and Korahe zones are either non-operational or producing under capacity due to damage and needed repairs. UNICEF and Action Contre La Faim (ACF) have identified the rehabilitation and maintenance of existing boreholes in Somali Region as a top priority. UNICEF reported that it is scheduled to rehabilitate approximately 28 boreholes in the coming weeks.

CONCLUSION

¶13. USG HAT staff report that the current dry season is expected to be more severe than normal and that some parts of Somali Region are already facing severe water shortages. In addition, USG HAT staff note that water quality in the region is generally poor, contributing to increased incidents of water-related diseases, including diarrhea among children. USG HAT staff identify the need for immediate emergency water interventions, including the repair and maintenance of borehole wells and water tankering. UNICEF and ACF have prioritized borehole repairs and maintenance to augment available water supplies. In addition, UNICEF reports that emergency water tankering operations will be required in parts of Somali Region beginning in February. With the onset of the April rainy season, addressing water-related disease transmission through additional water treatment interventions will become increasingly important. NGO and U.N. agencies are implementing several small-scale water treatment interventions in the region that can potentially be expanded if needs increase. USG HAT staff will continue to closely monitor the water situation in Somali Region in the coming months leading up to the April gu rains. In the longer term, USG HAT staff recommend support for hand-dug well and birked rehabilitation to mitigate chronic water shortages.

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